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Democrats and Cafta

The Central American Free Trade Agreement passed the Senate last week, as everyone expected, but the more interesting news is who voted against it. Hint: This isn't Bill Clinton's Democratic Party anymore.

Nafta was one of the former President's signature achievements, and free trade one of the issues he used to define himself as a New Democrat. But last week only 10 Senate Democrats found the nerve to support Cafta, as opposed to 27 who voted for Nafta in 1993. Support among House Democrats looks even worse, with 10 or fewer expected to support Cafta when it comes up for a vote this summer, compared with 102 who backed Nafta.

Just as startling is which Senators voted against free trade with our southern neighbors. They include Joe Biden, who is often lauded as a statesman-internationalist; Chris Dodd, the self-avowed friend of Latin American democracy; Evan Bayh, the alleged heir to the New Democrat mantle; Jon Corzine, who made a fortune from free global capital markets at Goldman Sachs; and John Kerry, who lost last year's election in part because voters suspected he wasn't what he claimed to be (e.g., a free trader).

The biggest surprise, at least to us, is the no cast by New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. We'd have thought that a modest trade-opening deal with a few poor countries was an ideal chance to continue her march to moderation and demonstrate to business that she'd follow in the path of her husband as she seeks the White House in 2008. Apparently not.

Why this protectionist turn by Democrats? Opponents claim that this deal is somehow worse on labor and environmental protections than Nafta and other bilateral trade accords, but in fact any differences are nominal. If anything, the Bush Administration has made too many protectionist concessions to U.S. sugar growers, among others, in an attempt to appease Democratic concerns.

A more honest explanation may be pure partisanship, as Democrats hope to deny President Bush a legislative victory. But this is still troubling, since trade has long been more of a regional than partisan issue. Mr. Clinton would never have passed Nafta through a Democratic Congress without the support of 34 Republicans in the Senate and 132 in the House.

Perhaps Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Biden and the rest are all eyeing each other as they maneuver for 2008 and want to make sure no one can get to their left with Big Labor. Or perhaps they all believe they have no choice but to march to the orders of MoveOn.org, the Daily Kos and other liberals who are threatening primary challenges for any Democrat who supports Mr. Bush on anything. The latter theory is supported by Ron Brownstein's article in the latest National Journal about the rise of this Bush-hating, but rich and mobilized, Internet-based left.

Whatever the explanation, this Democratic turn against free trade is bad for the country. The U.S. hasn't had a protectionist President since Herbert Hoover, and we all remember how that turned out.